

Sūrah Burūj

Period of Revelation and Subject Matter

This *sūrah* was revealed at the time when the disbelievers of the Quraysh began persecuting people who were embracing Islam. They were angry at people giving up their ancestral religion and accepting a new one. In this *sūrah*, the Quraysh are warned that if they do not give up their persecution and oppression they will soon be seized by the Almighty and will never be released from His grasp. Simultaneously, the oppressed Muslims are assured that they should not get intimidated by this wave of coercion and tyranny let loose by the Quraysh; they should remain steadfast on this new religion. However tough the circumstances may be, they should remember that the God in whom they have professed faith is all-powerful and no one can stop Him from implementing His will. At the end, the disbelievers are warned that they should not regard this Qur'ān which is informing them of this danger to be something of the nature of magic and sorcery or poetry and soothsaying; it is, in fact, revealed by the Almighty and its origin is the guarded tablet (*lawḥ-i mahfūz*). Each and every word of it will come true.

Analysis of the Discourse

Following is the sequence of the discourse of the *sūrah*:

Verses (1-4): Oaths are sworn by the sky consisting of forts and by the Day of Judgement that the Day of Judgement is bound to come and there is eternal doom for people who will be thrown in the pits of Hell.

Verses (5-11): Believers who were oppressed because they had professed faith in the God of the heavens and earth are promised help and given glad tidings of Paradise on the condition that they remain steadfast on their faith. At the same time, people who have oppressed these Muslims are threatened with torment. They are the ones who were not even moved to repent from these acts of coercion.

Verses (12-16): A mention in the light of God's attributes of majesty and grandeur of the all-embracing nature of His punishment and of the extent of His mercy and forgiveness for those who repent from this crime.

Verses (17-18): A reference to the tyranny and oppression of some nations of the past who had persecuted believers in the way similar to

what the Quraysh were doing now and because of which they were punished by the Almighty.

Verses (19-22): Sorrow is expressed at the misfortune of the Quraysh as per which they were persisting to deny the warnings of the Qur'ān and were inebriated with the lust for power; whereas these warnings are a reality and there is no escape for them. They are not beyond God's control. He has surrounded them from all sides. The Qur'ān is not of the genre of poetry and soothsaying as they allege. It is a very noble and majestic discourse revealed by the Almighty and it originates from the guarded tablet.

Text and Translation

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

وَالسَّمَاءِ ذَاتِ الْبُرُوجِ (١) وَالْيَوْمِ الْمَوْعُودِ (٢) وَشَاهِدٍ وَمَشْهُودٍ (٣) قُتِلَ أَصْحَابُ الْأُخْدُودِ (٤) النَّارِ ذَاتِ الْوُفُودِ (٥) إِذْ هُمْ عَلَيْهَا قُعُودٌ (٦) وَهُمْ عَلَى مَا يَفْعَلُونَ بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ شُهُودٌ (٧) وَمَا نَقَمُوا مِنْهُمْ إِلَّا أَنْ يُؤْمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَمِيدِ (٨) الَّذِي لَهُ مُلْكُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاللَّهُ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ (٩) إِنَّ الَّذِينَ فَتَنُوا الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَتُوبُوا فَلَهُمْ عَذَابُ جَهَنَّمَ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابُ الْحَرِيقِ (١٠) إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ لَهُمْ جَنَّاتٌ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ ذَلِكَ الْفَوْزُ الْكَبِيرُ (١١) إِنَّ بَطْشَ رَبِّكَ لَشَدِيدٌ (١٢) إِنَّهُ هُوَ يُبْدِئُ وَيُعِيدُ (١٣) وَهُوَ الْغَفُورُ الْوَدُودُ (١٤) ذُو الْعَرْشِ الْمَجِيدُ (١٥) فَعَالٌ لِمَا يُرِيدُ (١٦) هَلْ أَتَاكَ حَدِيثُ الْجُنُودِ (١٧) فِرْعَوْنَ وَثَمُودَ (١٨) بَلِ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فِي تَكْذِيبٍ (١٩) وَاللَّهُ مِنْ وَرَائِهِمْ مُحِيطٌ (٢٠) بَلْ هُوَ قُرْآنٌ مَجِيدٌ (٢١) فِي لَوْحٍ مَحْفُوظٍ (٢٢)

In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Ever Merciful.

By the sky consisting of forts and the promised day and one who sees and that what is seen. Doomed are the companions of the ditch of the fuelled-fire when they will be sitting on it and will see what they had been doing with the believers. (1-7)

And they merely expressed their wrath on them because they professed faith in God, the Mighty, the Praiseworthy, to whom only belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and God is watching every thing. (8-9)

For those who persecuted believing men and believing women and did not repent is surely the punishment of Hell and the torment of burning. However, those who strongly embraced faith and did righteous deeds, for

them are the gardens in which rivers flow. This, in fact, is great success. (10-11)

Indeed severe is the grip of your Lord. He alone begins and He alone will bring back. And He is all-Forgiving and all-Loving, Lord of the throne, the glorious,¹ doer of whatever He desires. (12-16)

Has the story of the forces reached you? Of the forces of the Pharaoh and the Thamūd? But these disbelievers will continue to deny. And God is surrounding them from all sides. [This is not something to be denied]. In fact, this is an exalted discourse. It is in a preserved tablet. (17-22)

Explanation

وَالسَّمَاءِ ذَاتِ الْبُرُوجِ²(١)

The word بُرُج means forts and castles. It is used in this meaning both in Arabic and in the Qur'ān. Wherever it is used as an adjective qualifying the heavens, it refers to the forts and observation posts in which angels of God are always stationed to stop the devils from crossing a certain boundary – the *malā' a'lā* – in the divine kingdom. If they dare try to cross this boundary, then shooting stars are pelted at them, as is mentioned in various other *sūrahs* of the Qur'ān. It is not possible for anyone from the jinn folk or the men folk to enter the limits of the *malā' a'lā* or eavesdrop in divine matters.

The oaths sworn here are meant to bear evidence to a premise which is mentioned further ahead. The addressees of this *sūrah* are the arrogant leaders of the Quraysh of Makkah and Tā'if, as is indicated in the introduction of the *sūrah* earlier. These leaders, being inebriated with the lust for power, were persecuting weak Muslims and arrogantly regarded their own forts and castles to be unconquerable. They never even thought that the all-powerful God upon whose frail servants they have let loose this wave of tyranny is not weak and helpless. In fact, He is the creator and the master of the sky consisting of fortresses. He is not unconcerned about the affairs of the world; in fact, His angels are continuously guarding every nook and corner of this world from the fortresses in which they are stationed. Whenever He desires, He can destroy all the castles, pavilions and edifices of these people and bring down their pride and conceit to ashes.

1. There has been an obvious mistake in the translation of verse fifteen by the author, which I have corrected here. He has translated the verse by regarding the adjective الْمَجِيدُ to qualify the noun الْعَرْشِ which of course is not the case since the former is declined in the nominative and the latter in the genitive. (Translator)

2. By the sky consisting of forts.

وَالْيَوْمِ الْمَوْعُودِ (٢) ³

Here in this verse, an oath is sworn by the Day of Judgement whose advent has been promised by the Almighty. It is sworn by here, just as it is in Sūrah Qiyāmah. Swearing by the Day of Judgement which is meant to frighten people of it alludes to the fact that no sane person can deny it. Thus it is said in Sūrah Qiyāmah that its testimony is present in man's soul itself; no external evidence is required for it: *بَلِّ الْإِنْسَانُ عَلَى نَفْسِهِ بَصِيرَةً* (in fact, he himself is a witness upon his own self, however much he may put up excuses, (75:14-15).

وَشَٰهِدٍ وَمَشْهُودٍ (٣) ⁴

Both nouns are undefined so that they can connote generality. All the testimonies and evidences of the Day of Judgement are thereby alluded to which are found in every nook and corner of the world on the condition that a person possesses keen eyes and a discerning heart. Thus, for example:

-- Every object of this world, big or small, bears evidence to the power, wisdom, mercy, providence and other superior attributes of the Almighty. The obvious consequence of these attributes, as is explained by the Qur'ān, is that this world should not just continue the way it is nor end accidentally; in fact, it is essential that a day come in which the Almighty discriminate between the pious and the impious. This is the day when those who spent their lives according to the will of the Almighty will receive reward and others who have spent their lives without having any sense of accountability will be punished. If this does not happen, then this would mean that the Creator of this world regards good and evil to be equivalent.

-- The Qur'ān has narrated at many places the accounts of the messengers and their struggle against their people and also the consequence of this struggle. It has described how the Almighty destroyed the people who denied His messengers even though these people possessed great power and glory. It has urged man to learn a lesson from the signs and remnants of such people. These remnants have been preserved by the Almighty for the very reason that others should learn a lesson from them: the Almighty will deal with them in the same manner as He dealt with these people if they too followed in their footsteps and became arrogant.

3. And the promised day.

4. And one who sees and that what is seen.

Together with this argumentative nature of the words *شَاهِدٍ* and *مَشْهُودٍ* there is also an element of intimidation hidden in them. This will manifest itself on the Day of Judgement. By this element of intimidation, reference is to the fact that no one should remain in the misconception that whatever he is doing in this world is not known to the Almighty in any way; in fact, whatever he does will come before him one by one and he will see everything with his own eyes. His limbs themselves will bear witness to all his words and deeds. Noble scribes as angels deputed by God will present a report of all his good and bad deeds. The prophets of God, the righteous and the reformers too will bear witness to what they taught their people and how they reacted to their message.

قُتِلَ أَصْحَابُ الْأُخْدُودِ (٤) النَّارِ ذَاتِ الْوُفُودِ (٥)⁵

These verses do not represent the complement of oath (*muqsam 'alayh*) ie. the premise on which evidence is presented through an oath. An ellipsis of the complement of oath has occurred here just as it has occurred in Sūrah Qāf and some other *sūrahs*. It is replaced with verses which remind and admonish those who were rejecting the Day of Judgement. This style is adopted at places where the complement of oath is so obvious that a person's mind comprehends it even if it is not mentioned. This creates brevity in the discourse as the whole complement of oath can be regarded to have been suppressed since the context strongly occasions it. Here if the complement of oath is unveiled in the light of the oaths sworn, it would be something to the effect: The Day of Judgement is certain to come; nothing is beyond the control of the Almighty; on that day, everyone will witness the results of their deeds.

The word *الْأُخْدُودِ* means “a pit” or “a ditch” or “a cavity”. It is qualified by the words *النَّارِ ذَاتِ الْوُفُودِ* which means that this pit will be filled with fuelled-fire. The words “fuelled-fire” intend to convey the fact that the Almighty has made available ample fuel in order to make this fire burn continuously. No one should think that this fire will dwindle once its fuel starts to diminish. In Sūrah Baqarah, this fuel is explained by the words: *فَاتَّقُوا النَّارَ الَّتِي وَقُودُهَا النَّاسُ وَالْحِجَارَةُ (٢: ٢٤)* (then fear the Fire whose fuel is these men and these stones, (2:24)).

While explaining the words *أَصْحَابُ الْأُخْدُودِ* (companions of the ditch), our exegetes have recorded the account of a king without mentioning his name and period. They have only recorded that he cast many believing Christians into ditches of fire because they had refused to prostrate before him. Even though history has recorded some incidents of burning of

5. Doomed are the companions of the ditch of the fuelled-fire.

people at the stake in the times when various Christian sects were at daggers drawn with each other, however the strange things written by our exegetes in the explanation of this incident in particular are not acceptable in any way; I would just tend to ignore what they have written. Here the addressees are the leaders of the Quraysh, as is indicated earlier. They were persecuting and oppressing weak Muslims. How could they have learnt a lesson from the fate of a king whose identity was unknown to them; the exegetes too have no knowledge of it. Moreover, this also needs our consideration that the threatened punishment mentioned here in these verses relates to the Hereafter and not to this world. If this threat is regarded to relate to this world, then though this would certainly portray to a small extent the oppressions they committed but the Qur'ān has not mentioned any exemplary fate they would meet in this world that would induce the Quraysh to learn a lesson from it. The fact that the fire initiated by them reduced them and their settlements to ashes is something which only our exegetes have mentioned. The Qur'ān has not alluded to it in any way even though it was the real thing that needed to be mentioned for the purpose under consideration.

In my opinion, these verses actually threaten the arrogant leaders of the Quraysh who had let loose a wave of persecution over Muslims and were harming them in various ways. They are warned that if they did not desist from this tyranny and oppression, they will be thrown in that ditch of Hell which will be fuelled by fire that will never die down.

إِذْ هُمْ عَلَيْهَا قُعُودٌ (٦) وَهُمْ عَلَىٰ مَا يَفْعَلُونَ بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ شُهُودٌ (٧)⁶

These verses depict the fate of this tyrannical lot. The implication is that first they will be made to sit at the edge of the fire-filled ditch so that they are able to see their future abode and then they will taste punishment of each of their evil deeds. In other words, the word شُهُودٌ denotes the outcome of the verb contained in it. Several examples of this style are found in the Qur'ān.

Here it should be kept in consideration that if a criminal is shown his abode before he is consigned to it, his agony is doubled. The Qur'ān has alluded at many places that criminals shall first be made to sit at the edges of the pit of Hell so that they are able to see where they will be going and then they shall be cast into it. It is mentioned in the Qur'ān that the Pharaoh and his people will be made to see Hell numerous times when they would be residing in the world of Barzakh.

6. When they will be sitting on it and will see what they had been doing with the believers.

It is possible that a question arise here in the mind of someone: The particle *إِذْ* is used to remind someone of an incident that has occurred in the past while I have taken it as portraying a future incident. The answer to this question is that at many places in the Qur'ān incidents that will take place on the Day of Judgement are mentioned in the past tense. This style is explained by scholars as future incidents being mentioned in the past tense to denote their certainty. I have explained this style at a number of places in this *tafsīr*.

وَمَا نَقَمُوا مِنْهُمْ إِلَّا أَنْ يُؤْمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَمِيدِ (٨)⁷

The implication of this verse is that this wrath was not let loose on Muslims because they were guilty of some offence; on the contrary, their greatest virtue became their greatest crime in the eyes of these oppressors, as a result of which they were punished. Their only crime was that they believed in God, the Mighty, the Praiseworthy. The truth of the matter is that by professing faith in the Almighty these people have fulfilled their greatest obligation towards Him. Fulfilling this obligation is something very commendable and noble and not worthy of revenge. However, people who have lost their senses behave in this very manner with their well-wishers.

From among the attributes of God, two are mentioned: *الْعَزِيزُ* and *الْحَمِيدُ*. The former depicts His power, honour and majesty while the latter His mercy, providence and being worthy of praise and gratitude. The purpose of mentioning them is that only the being Who has such attributes is worthy of being professed faith in. Those who have professed faith in Him have relied on the support of someone whose support is the real support and it is only they who will succeed. The glad tidings for oppressed Muslims and the threat for those disbelievers who were harassing them found in between the lines of these verses does not require any explanation.

الَّذِي لَهُ مُلْكُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاللَّهُ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ (٩)⁸

Here in this verse, further light is cast on the glad tidings and threat referred to in the previous verse. The implication is that only He is worthy of being professed faith in to whom belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and His refuge is sufficient for people who

7. And they merely expressed their wrath on them because they professed faith in God, the Mighty, the Praiseworthy.

8. To whom only belongs the kingdom of the Heavens and the earth, and God is watching every thing.

professed faith in Him.

The expression *وَاللَّهُ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ* directs Muslims who are being harassed by the enemies of faith to rest assured that the Being to Whom belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth is not unaware of this cruelty and when this is so how long will He put up with the cruelty being meted out to His people in His own kingdom. Simultaneously, the disbelievers are warned that they should not become conceited because of the respite granted to them by the Almighty. The Almighty is not unaware of their oppression; He is observing all what they are doing. It would not be long before He will avenge the brutality faced by His weak servants and powerful will be this revenge.

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ فَتَنُوا الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَتُوبُوا فَلَهُمْ عَذَابُ جَهَنَّمَ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابُ الْحَرِيقِ (١٠)⁹

The threat found in between lines in the previous verses is expressed blatantly here. The word *فِتْنَةٌ* specifically denotes the oppression meted out to people to force them to give up their religion. It is used in this meaning at a number of places in the Qur'ān and this has been explained earlier.

Believing women are specially mentioned besides believing men because the times of trial to which these verses relate were the ones in which women, in particular slave-women, being the weaker sections of the society, were severely oppressed. These oppressors and tyrants are informed that if they want to live securely, they should repent and reform themselves as soon as possible. For they should remember that if they die in this state, they will go straight to Hell.

After a mention of *عَذَابُ جَهَنَّمَ* (punishment of Hell), a mention of *عَذَابُ الْحَرِيقِ* (torment of burning) was apparently not needed. However, this mention is that of the specific after the general. Hell is the place of all forms of torments; the greatest of these is the torment of burning. In other words, these people are warned that besides other forms of torment they will also have to bear the torment of burning and hence they must thoroughly contemplate their fate.

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ لَهُمْ جَنَّاتٌ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ ذَلِكَ الْفَوْزُ الْكَبِيرُ (١١)¹⁰

This verse encourages the believers who remained steadfast on their faith even in very trying circumstances. As per contextual indication, the verb *آمَنُوا* is used in its complete sense. The implication is that if in spite of

9. For those who persecuted believing men and believing women and did not repent is surely the punishment of Hell and the torment of burning.

10. However, those who strongly embraced faith and did righteous deeds, for them are the gardens in which rivers flow. This, in fact, is great success.

the oppression of these tyrants, the believers who remain steadfast on their faith and do righteous deeds will indeed be rewarded with gardens beneath which rivers flow.

The sentence *ذَلِكَ الْفَوْزُ الْكَبِيرُ* (this, in fact, is great success) refers to the fact that this success should not be deemed ordinary: it is eternal and everlasting; only he who attains it will come to know how great a kingdom he was blessed with in return for a few days of trial.

¹¹ *إِنَّ بَطْشَ رَبِّكَ لَشَدِيدٌ* (١٢)

The warnings which have been sounded in the previous verses to the disbelievers who were persecuting the believers and the glad tidings which have been given to the oppressed Muslims are further emphasized and substantiated here by the Almighty through reminding them of some of His attributes.

So strong is the grip of God that no one should be in the misconception that he will be able to save himself from Him through his clan, supporters or deities. No one can save himself from God's grip nor can anyone else be of any help to him in this matter.

If the address found in the word *رَبِّكَ* (your Lord) is related to the Prophet (sws), then this would be in his capacity of a representative and advocate of the Muslims.

¹² *إِنَّهُ هُوَ يُبْدِئُ وَيُعِيدُ* (١٣)

The punishment of Hell with which the oppressors were threatened in the previous verses is substantiated here: no one should remain in the misconception that the threat of the Hereafter is fake and that there is no life or death after one dies. It is the Almighty only Who creates people and when He does so He is also able to re-create them. When He faced no difficulty in creating them the first time, why should He face difficulty in re-creating them?

¹³ *وَهُوَ الْغَفُورُ الْودُودُ* (١٤) *ذُو الْعَرْشِ الْمَجِيدُ* (١٥) *فَعَالٌ لِّمَا يُرِيدُ* (١٦)

Since only He is all-forgiving and all-loving, if people want to be emotionally attached to someone, then they should attach themselves to Him. No one else can be of any help to people. He is the Lord of the

11. Indeed, severe is the grip of your Lord.

12. He alone begins and He alone will bring back.

13. And He is all-Forgiving and all-Loving, Lord of the throne, the glorious, doer of whatever He desires.

throne and He is the glorious. No one shares His kingdom and sovereignty. He is dependent on no one and neither can anyone hinder His plans.

هَلْ أَتَاكَ حَدِيثُ الْجُنُودِ (١٧) فِرْعَوْنَ وَثَمُودَ (١٨)¹⁴

In order to substantiate the facts mentioned above, certain examples from history are cited. Amongst the tales of nations mentioned in the Qur'ān who were seized by the Almighty the wave of tyranny let loose by the Thamūd and the Pharaoh is specially mentioned here. The leaders of the Quraysh were overawed by the power and glory of these nations. The Quraysh are urged to seek a lesson from their fate: they were destroyed in the wink of an eye and no one was able to save them.

بَلِّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فِي تَكْذِيبِ (١٩)¹⁵

A portion of the discourse is suppressed before the word بَلِّ because of contextual indications. If we try to unveil it, the whole discourse would be something like this: Whatever they are being read out is the truth word for word. No one can possibly deny it; however, these rejecters of the Day of Judgement after denying it deliberately have become so stubborn that they are not ready to accept it.

وَاللَّهُ مِنْ وَرَائِهِمْ مُحِيطٌ (٢٠)¹⁶

The word وَرَاءَ means both “front” and “back”. The implication is that if they are adamant in their denial, then let them be so; however, they should remember that their denial cannot negate the reality. The Almighty is surrounding them from all sides and they cannot run away from Him.

بَلِّ هُوَ قُرْآنٌ مَجِيدٌ (٢١) فِي لَوْحٍ مَحْفُوظٍ (٢٢)¹⁷

Before the letter بَلِّ, a certain part of the discourse is suppressed because it is considered to be understood and contextual indications point to it. If this suppressed portion is unfolded, the whole discourse would be something to the effect: The fate with which this Qur'ān is threatening them is a certain reality; it is an exalted discourse; it is not of

14. Has the story of the forces reached you? Of the forces of Pharaoh and the Thamūd?

15. [This is not something to be denied]. But these disbelievers will continue to deny.

16. And God is surrounding them from all sides.

17. In fact, this is an exalted discourse. It is in a preserved tablet.

the genre of poetry and soothsaying; it is, on the contrary, revealed by the Almighty and its origin is the guarded tablet, which is inaccessible to both jinn and men.

With the help and grace of God, the *tafsīr* of this *sūrah* stands completed. فالحمد لله على احسانه (gratitude be to God for His blessings)

Lahore,

11th October, 1979 AD

18th Dhū al-Qa‘dah, 1399 AH
